

Comments of Gary W. Leaming
before the
Technical Study Panel on the Utilization of Belt Air
Salt Lake City, Utah
May 16-17, 2007

On behalf of Canyon Fuel Company, Sufco Mine, I would like to thank each of you for this opportunity to provide comment concerning the use of belt air to ventilate working faces in underground coal mines. I have worked in various capacities in underground coal mining at the Sufco mine for more than 32 years and I'm currently the Safety Manager. I have had the opportunity to witness many changes in our industry including great reductions in the injury incident rates all across our country. One thing that has remained constant at the Sufco mine during all that time is the safe use of belt air to ventilate working faces.

Sufco has safely used belt air in 3-entry development sections, mains development and longwall mining. As has previously been mentioned, this practice increases quantities of air reaching the working faces without greatly increasing ventilating pressures on the ventilation infrastructure. This helps significantly in longwall panels that may reach 15,000' in length. Sufco Mine, like many other mines, will continue to gather America's coal reserves under deeper overburden. As we move into this type geology, using belt air at the working face will become even more necessary as two-entry systems need to be employed for improved ground control.

Using the belt entry as an intake air source is an important safety factor because it provides a second intake air escapeway which is almost always more valuable than a return escapeway in event of emergency. In the event of a fire or explosion, an isolated intake air entry such as a belt entry has a greater potential to be non-contaminated giving miners more escape options to choose from. Return escapeways and entries eventually become contaminated when the mine fan is running. Keeping the mine fan operational is vital to an escape or rescue effort. Therefore, isolated intake air entries or escapeways are generally more valuable than return air entries.

Keeping this intake air theme in mind for beltlines, many mines supply fire fighting water to their working sections through the beltline. Having return air in this beltline entry would almost certainly cause more difficulty in firefighting operations than if the belt air were intake. Hooking up and routing of hoses is much more safe and accomplished more quickly in a smoke-free atmosphere which intake air more likely will provide. Regardless of where the fire line is located, intake air is more likely to make fire fighting successful.

It is hard to know or impossible to predict where a mine emergency may originate. It would, however, be a shame to look back knowing we took away a valuable early warning system that had the potential to save lives. As good as underground monitoring systems and sensors are, there is still no substitute for seasoned miners who know in an instant if something has changed in their environment. For continued safety of underground miners, the advantage of intake belt air and its early warning potential should be maintained. During emergencies, seconds count and may make the difference.

In conclusion, I appreciate the large responsibility this technical study panel has in maintaining and improving miner health and safety while still keeping our (this industry does belong to each of us) industry strong and effective. I am confident that each of you will carefully consider and weigh your judgments and direction in order to move coal mining forward in a safe, responsible manner. Thank you again for this opportunity to give comment on the use of belt air and its importance to the coal industry of America.